

Anyone among my readers who is older than Gen Xers may remember the famously titled self-help book, *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyways* (1988) by American psychologist, Susan Jeffers. Twenty-five years later, she's written a far subtler and more convincing volume on life's uncertainty and how "to stop trying to control the uncontrollable." Many of Jeffers' insights in *Embracing Uncertainty: Breakthrough Methods for Achieving Peace of Mind When Facing the Unknown* can contribute to entrepreneurial wellness, a recurrent theme in my blogging.

Jeffers has heard many patients express the anxiety that has come as scientific technologies overwhelm us, breaking down long-held traditions in life, religion and work. Acts of terrorism embody a threat that has become the "new normal" of 21<sup>st</sup> century life.

Uncertainty characterizes all of our lives, because we do not know what the future holds— not only as entrepreneurs, but in any area of our lives.

Society tends to teach us to want to control everything, she says, including our careers,



relationships, children, health, money, the state of the world, and so on. We unconsciously expect that life should be certain, safe and predictable and we are uncomfortable (even panicked) about life's increasing uncertainty. We pop pills to decrease our anxiety, or go into denial (acting vainly to try to make life safe), becoming addicted to work and activities that take

our minds off the reality that we have "so little control."

Jeffers says that sadly, we often spend so much of our lives worrying and trying to prevent the bad from happening that we forget to enjoy what's good. And so we waste our very lives. She argues that we need to find a way to enjoy "a rich, joyous, abundant life" that can exist "in the presence of uncertainty" (5). Uncertainty may actually make life wonderful, she says, however counterintuitively.

She identifies three challenging realities we need to accept that can paradoxically make ourselves comfortable with uncertainty:

### **Reality #1:**

The only certainty is that life is uncertain—if we truly believe that life is uncertain, we don't look for "guarantees." We must surrender to the reality that we "control nothing about the

future” and view that as an affirmation, not as bad news. So we must let go of the hope that we can create anything “certain” in our lives (8).

### **Reality #2:**

“Once you surrender to the fact that you’re unable to control the uncertainty” in life, “you will, at last, be able to breathe a sigh of relief” (8). That is, if you can surrender to the uncertainty.

When we reach a state of “surrender,” we can’t help but feel peace because we stop struggling to do the impossible. We recognize that it’s a delusion to think we can control everything. So when we let go of the outcome of any situation, we experience calm, peace and rest. We can look for ways of being that actually embrace the uncertain nature of life itself. How amazing such a philosophy can be for entrepreneurs who by necessity work without safety nets (e.g. uncertain markets, clients and income).

### **Reality #3:**

Jeffers contends that when we accept deeply that life is uncertain, it opens the door to a powerful way to live. We look instead for the valuable gifts inherent in each of us, no matter how bad things may seem in any given moment.

Finding the gifts in each moment minimizes and “can even erase” our suffering. We need to look instead for a way of being in the world that assures us that we can handle whatever life hands us—so to be able to we live with a “Bring it on” attitude, knowing that we can face anything that comes our way (10). We view uncertainty no longer as something to fear, but as an “enriching” aspect of life.

In other words, instead of wallowing in distress over not being able to create certainty in life, we can find delight and adventure as we explore our own power to deal with uncertainty. Jeffers writes: “There is great adventure in the unknown that propels us to discover powerful parts of ourselves that we didn’t know were there” (11).

Every new moment, day or experience (good or bad) brings a challenge and sense of wonder to



us, she says: “The trick is to learn to love the uncertainty of it all . . . to find, at last, the great satisfaction, the great joy and the great opportunity that lies within the uncertainty” (11).

Jeffers stresses that we all have a choice to make—to live “unhappy, exhausted and with futility” (“soul-destroying ways of thinking and being”) or with a sense of excitement and possibility about the

uncertainty. In *Embracing Uncertainty* she provides some 42 exercises to drop the ol' pattern and embrace life as a "grand adventure" *because* it is uncertain.

When we open ourselves up to uncertainty, we can see "the beauty, miracle, joy and possibility in it all" (13). In this light, we realize that there will be no truly terrible thing in our future, if we can find the learning and growth that come from it all, convert our upset, panic and uncertainty into learning and growth. Even if things go wrong, we can be an adventurer rather than a worrier or victim, wondering "What can I learn from this," and "I wonder how this will all turn out" and "I wonder what I'll learn from this?" It's better ultimately to be excited by uncertainty than miserable about it.

Jeffers contrasts the "Lower Self" (similar to the "Lizard Brain" in Seth Godin and elsewhere) as one filled with insecurity, doubt, pain, fear) to the "Higher Self" (that part filled with peace, confidence, power and love). Life always looks better from the latter self and there we find the power to embrace uncertainty. When you live by "wondering," you are open to both life's positive and negative aspects, so that you can relax as the future unfolds, not inflating your mind with hopes and expectations that can be dashed. You observe (but do not attach to) the facts and your emotions.

By contrast, when one lives by "hoping," the dashing of your hopes leaves you unhappy and depressed. Those invested in hope tend to have blind certainty, want to be sure about everything and a stubborn need to be right (as a "know it all"). Jeffers insists that wisdom inheres instead in knowing that we "know nothing" for certain, so we need to be open to wonder and to the adventure of learning. We can let go of how we think "life's supposed to go," and feel curious about what may happen. She offers this statement (which owes much to Buddhist philosophy):

Don't wish for it to happen.

Don't wish for it not to happen

Just watch it happen.

Let the wonder of life unfold (25).

We need to try to observe our own lives and avoid being caught up in their drama, because it's hard amidst much drama to embrace uncertainty.

Embracing the uncertainty includes cultivating emotions like wonder, curiosity, humour, love and trust that are more powerful when based in a spiritual realm (which will differ among us—whether we choose God or a creative source of goodness in the universe). When we work on embracing uncertainty, we can ultimately say, "Bring it all on," because we know that we're up to the challenge and that life is "hard for the fun of it" (266). Moreover, our *creativity* thrives in the questions that flow from existential uncertainty.

One thing we *can* do is take time as we live out this philosophy, recognizing that spiritual change takes place slowly and that joy comes from patience. Jeffers suggests another mantra: “I let go and trust that it’s all happening perfectly,” because if we can learn and grow from it all, “it all *is* happening perfectly.”

In this, one’s *power* is a state of consciousness (not a force to control people or events): We trust our own power to know we can handle it all. “Trust that whatever you need will be there. And if it isn’t, trust yourself to find it” (279).

There are potentially endless uncertainties in our entrepreneurial, professional and personal journeys, which no degree program, workshop or even book can make safe. But I highly recommend Jeffers’ volume and its exercises as worthy companions on those journeys.

*Now it’s your turn: how do you deal with uncertainty in your life and work? Please share, as I greatly value your thoughts on uncertainty!*